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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE LITTLE HUNCHBACK ZIA ***

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THE LITTLE HUNCHBACK ZIA

BY

FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY SPENCER BAIRD NICHOLS AND W. T. BENDA

And it came to pass nigh upon nineteen hundred and sixteen years ago

THE LITTLE HUNCHBACK ZIA

The little hunchback Zia toiled slowly up the steep road, keeping in the deepest shadows, even though the night had long fallen. Sometimes he staggered with weariness or struck his foot against a stone and smothered his involuntary cry of pain. He was so full of terror that he was afraid to utter a sound which might cause any traveler to glance toward him. This

he feared more than any other thing—that some man or woman might look at him too closely. If such a one knew much and had keen eyes, he or she might in some way guess even at what they might not yet see.

Since he had fled from the village in which his wretched short life had been spent he had hidden himself in thickets and behind walls or rocks or bushes during the day, and had only come forth at night to stagger along his way in the darkness. If he had not managed to steal some food before he began his journey and if he had not found in one place some beans dropped from a camel's feeding-bag, he would have starved. For five nights he had been wandering on, but in his desperate fear he had lost count of time. When he had left the place he had called his home he had not known where he was going or where he might hide himself in the end. The old woman with whom he had lived and for whom he had begged and labored had driven him out with a terror as great as his own.

"Begone!" she had cried in a smothered shriek. "Get thee gone, accursed! Even now thou mayest have brought the curse upon me also. A creature born a hunchback comes on earth with the blight of Jehovah's wrath upon him. Go far! Go as far as thy limbs will carry thee! Let no man come near enough to thee to see it! If thou go far away before it is known, it will be forgotten that I have harbored thee."

He had stood and looked at her in the silence of the dead, his immense, black Syrian eyes growing wider and wider with childish horror. He had always regarded her with slavish fear. What he was to her he did not know; neither did he know how he had fallen into her hands. He knew only that he was not of her blood or of her country and that he yet seemed to have always belonged to her. In his first memory of his existence, a little deformed creature rolling about on the littered floor of her uncleanly hovel, he had trembled at the sound of her voice and had obeyed it like a beaten spaniel puppy. When he had grown older he had seen that she lived upon alms and thievery and witchlike evil doings that made all decent folk avoid her. She had no kinsfolk or friends, and only such visitors as came to her in the dark hours of night and seemed to consult with her as she sat and mumbled strange incantations while she stirred a boiling pot. Zia had heard of soothsayers and dealers with evil spirits, and at such hours was

either asleep on his pallet in a far corner or, if he lay awake, hid his face under his wretched covering and stopped his ears. Once when she had drawn near and found his large eyes open and staring at her in spellbound terror, she had beaten him horribly and cast him into the storm raging outside.

A strange passion in her seemed her hatred of his eyes. She could not endure that he should look at her as if he were thinking. He must not let his eyes rest on her for more than a moment when he spoke. He must keep them fixed on the ground or look away from her. From his babyhood this had been so. A hundred times she had struck him when he was too young to understand her reason. The first strange lesson he had learned was that she hated his eyes and was driven to fury when she found them resting innocently upon her. Before he was three years old he had learned this thing and had formed the habit of looking down upon the earth as he limped about. For long he thought that his eyes were as hideous as his body was distorted. In her frenzies she told him that evil spirits looked out from them and that he was possessed of devils. Without thought of rebellion or resentment he accepted with timorous humility, as part of his existence, her taunts at his twisted limbs. What use in rebellion or anger? With the fatalism of the East he resigned himself to that which was. He had been born a deformity, and even his glance carried evil. This was life. He knew no other. Of his origin he knew nothing except that from the old woman's rambling outbursts he had gathered that he was of Syrian blood and a homeless outcast.

But though he had so long trained himself to look downward that it had at last become an effort to lift his heavily lashed eyelids, there came a time when he learned that his eyes were not so hideously evil as his task-mistress had convinced him that they were. When he was only seven years old she sent him out to beg alms for her, and on the first day of his going forth she said a strange thing, the meaning of which he could not understand.

"Go not forth with thine eyes bent downward on the dust. Lift them, and look long at those from whom thou askest alms. Lift them and look as I see thee look at the sky when thou knowest not I am near thee. I have seen

thee, hunchback. Gaze at the passers-by as if thou sawest their souls and asked help of them."

She said it with a fierce laugh of derision, but when in his astonishment he involuntarily lifted his gaze to hers, she struck at him, her harsh laugh broken in two.

"Not at me, hunchback! Not at me! At those who are ready to give!" she cried out.

He had gone out stunned with amazement. He wondered so greatly that when he at last sat down by the roadside under a fig-tree he sat in a dream. He looked up at the blueness above him as he always did when he was alone. His eyelids did not seem heavy when he lifted them to look at the sky. The blueness and the billows of white clouds brought rest to him, and made him forget what he was. The floating clouds were his only friends. There was something—yes, there was something, he did not know what. He wished he were a cloud himself, and could lose himself at last in the blueness as the clouds did when they melted away. Surely the blueness was the something.

The soft, dull pad of camel's feet approached upon the road without his hearing them. He was not roused from his absorption until the camel stopped its tread so near him that he started and looked up. It was necessary that he should look up a long way. He was a deformed little child, and the camel was a tall and splendid one, with rich trappings and golden bells. The man it carried was dressed richly, and the expression of his dark face was at once restless and curious. He was bending down and staring at Zia as if he were something strange.

"What dost thou see, child?" he said at last, and he spoke almost in a breathless whisper. "What art thou waiting for?"

Zia stumbled to his feet and held out his bag, frightened, because he had never begged before and did not know how, and if he did not carry back money and food, he would be horribly beaten again.

"Alms! alms!" he stammered. "Master—Lord—I beg for—for her who keeps me. She is poor and old. Alms, great lord, for a woman who is old!"

The man with the restless face still stared. He spoke as if unaware that he uttered words and as if he were afraid.

"The child's eyes!" he said. "I cannot pass him by! What is it? I must not be held back. But the unearthly beauty of his eyes!" He caught his breath as he spoke. And then he seemed to awaken as one struggling against a spell.

"What is thy name?" he asked.

Zia also had lost his breath. What had the man meant when he spoke of his eyes?

He told his name, but he could answer no further questions. He did not know whose son he was; he had no home; of his mistress he knew only that her name was Judith and that she lived on alms.

Even while he related these things he remembered his lesson, and, dropping his eyelids, fixed his gaze on the camel's feet.

"Why dost thou cast thine eyes downward?" the man asked in a troubled and intense voice.

Zia could not speak, being stricken with fear and the dumbness of bewilderment. He stood quite silent, and as he lifted his eyes and let them rest on the stranger's own, they became large with tears—big, piteous tears.

"Why?" persisted the man, anxiously. "Is it because thou seest evil in my soul?"

"No, no!" sobbed Zia. "One taught me to look away because I am hideous and—my eyes—are evil."

"Evil!" said the stranger. "They have lied to thee." He was trembling as he spoke. "A man who has been pondering on sin dare not pass their beauty

by. They draw him, and show him his own soul. Having seen them, I must turn my camel's feet backward and go no farther on this road which was to lead me to a black deed." He bent down, and dropped a purse into the child's alms-bag, still staring at him and breathing hard. "They have the look," he muttered, "of eyes that might behold the Messiah. Who knows? Who knows?" And he turned his camel's head, still shuddering a little, and he rode away back toward the place from which he had come.

There was gold in the purse he had given, and when Zia carried it back to Judith, she snatched it from him and asked him many questions. She made him repeat word for word all that had passed.

After that he was sent out to beg day after day, and in time he vaguely understood

[Illustration with caption: "'Perhaps when he is a man he will be a great soothsayer and reader of the stars'"]

that the old woman had spoken falsely when she had said that evil spirits looked forth hideously from his eyes. People often said that they were beautiful, and gave him money because something in his gaze drew them near to him. But this was not all. At times there were those who spoke under their breath to one another of some wonder of light in them, some strange luminousness which was not earthly.

"He surely sees that which we cannot. Perhaps when he is a man he will be a great soothsayer and reader of the stars," he heard a woman whisper to a companion one day.

Those who were evil were afraid to meet his gaze, and hated it as old Judith did, though, as he was not their servant, they dared not strike him when he lifted his soft, heavy eyelids.

But Zia could not understand what people meant when they whispered about him or turned away fiercely. A weight was lifted from his soul when he realized that he was not as revolting as he had believed. And when people spoke kindly to him he began to know something like happiness for the first time in his life. He brought home so much in his alms-bag that the

old woman ceased to beat him and gave him more liberty. He was allowed to go out at night and sleep under the stars. At such times he used to lie and look up at the jeweled myriads until he felt himself drawn upward and floating nearer and nearer to that unknown something which he felt also in the high blueness of the day.

When he first began to feel as if some mysterious ailment was creeping upon him he kept himself out of Judith's way as much as possible. He dared not tell her that sometimes he could scarcely crawl from one place to another. A miserable fevered weakness became his secret. As the old woman took no notice of him except when he brought back his day's earnings, it was easy to evade her. One morning, however, she fixed her eyes on him suddenly and keenly.

"Why art thou so white?" she said, and caught him by the arm, whirling him toward the light. "Art thou ailing?"

"No! no!" cried Zia.

She held him still for a few seconds, still staring.

"Thou art too white," she said. "I will have no such whiteness. It is the whiteness of—of an accursed thing. Get thee gone!"

He went away, feeling cold and shaken. He knew he was white. One or two almsgivers had spoken of it, and had looked at him a little fearfully. He himself could see that the flesh of his thin body was becoming an unearthly color. Now and then he had shuddered as he looked at it because —because—There was one curse so horrible beyond all others that the strongest man would have quailed in his dread of its drawing near him. And he was a child, a twelve-year-old boy, a helpless little hunchback mendicant.

When he saw the first white-and-red spot upon his flesh he stood still and stared at it, gasping, and the sweat started out upon him and rolled down in great drops.

"Jehovah!" he whispered, "God of Israel! Thy servant is but a child!"

But there broke out upon him other spots, and every time he found a new one his flesh quaked, and he could not help looking at it in secret again and again. Every time he looked it was because he hoped it might have faded away. But no spot faded away, and the skin on the palms of his hands began to be rough and cracked and to show spots also.

In a cave on a hillside near the road where he sat and begged there lived a deathly being who, with face swathed in linen and with bandaged stumps of limbs, hobbled forth now and then, and came down to beg also, but always keeping at a distance from all human creatures, and, as he approached the pitiful, rattled loudly his wooden clappers, wailing out: "Unclean! Unclean!"

It was the leper Berias, whose hopeless tale of awful days was almost done. Zia himself had sometimes limped up the hillside and laid some of his own poor food upon a stone near his cave so that he might find it. One day he had also taken a branch of almond-blossom in full flower, and had laid it by the food. And when he had gone away and stood at some distance watching to see the poor ghost come forth to take what he had given, he had seen him first clutch at the blossoming branch and fall upon his face, holding it to his breast, a white, bound, shapeless thing, sobbing, and uttering hoarse, croaking, unhuman cries. No almsgiver but Zia had ever dreamed of bringing a flower to him who was forever cut off from all bloom and loveliness.

It was this white, shuddering creature that Zia remembered with the sick chill of horror when he saw the spots.

"Unclean! Unclean!" he heard the cracked voice cry to the sound of the wooden clappers. "Unclean! Unclean!"

Judith was standing at the door of her hovel one morning when Zia was going forth for the day. He had fearfully been aware that for days she had been watching him as he had never known her to watch him before. This morning she had followed him to the door, and had held him there a few moments in the light with some harsh speech, keeping her eyes fixed on him the while.

Even as they so stood there fell upon the clear air of the morning a hollow, far-off sound—the sound of wooden clappers rattled together, and the hopeless crying of two words, "Unclean! Unclean!"

Then silence fell. Upon Zia descended a fear beyond all power of words to utter. In his quaking young torment he lifted his eyes and met the gaze of the old woman as it flamed down upon him.

"Go within!" she commanded suddenly, and pointed to the wretched room inside. He obeyed her, and she followed him, closing the door behind them.

"Tear off thy garment!" she ordered. "Strip thyself to thy skin—to thy skin!"

He shook from head to foot, his trembling hands almost refusing to obey him. She did not touch him, but stood apart, glaring. His garments fell from him and lay in a heap at his feet, and he stood among them naked.

One look, and she broke forth, shaking with fear herself, into a breathless storm of fury.

"Thou hast known this thing and hidden it!" she raved. "Leper! Leper! Accursed hunchback thing!"

As he stood in his nakedness and sobbed great, heavy childish sobs, she did not dare to strike him, and raged the more.

If it were known that she had harbored him, the priests would be upon her, and all that she had would be taken from her and burned. She would not even let him put his clothes on in her house.

"Take thy rags and begone in thy nakedness! Clothe thyself on the hillside! Let none see thee until thou art far away! Rot as thou wilt, but dare not to name me! Begone! begone! begone!"

And with his rags he fled naked through the doorway, and hid himself in the little wood beyond.

Later, as he went on his way, he had hidden himself in the daytime behind bushes by the wayside or off the road; he had crouched behind rocks and boulders; he had slept in caves when he had found them; he had shrunk away from all human sight. He knew it could not be long before he would be discovered, and then he would be shut up; and afterward he would be as Berias until he died alone. Like unto Berias! To him it seemed as though surely never child had sobbed before as he sobbed, lying hidden behind his boulders, among his bushes, on the bare hill among the rocks.

For the first four nights of his wandering he had not known where he was going, but on this fifth night he discovered. He was on the way to Bethlehem—beautiful little Bethlehem curving on the crest of the Judean mountains and smiling down upon the fairness of the fairest of sweet valleys, rich with vines and figs and olives and almond-trees. He dimly recalled stories he had overheard of its loveliness, and when he found that he had wandered unknowingly toward it, he was aware of a faint sense of peace. He had seen nothing of any other part of the world than the poor village outside which the hovel of his bond-mistress had clung to a low hill. Since he was near it, he vaguely desired to see Bethlehem.

He had learned of its nearness as he lay hidden in the undergrowth on the mountain-side that he had begun to climb the night before. Awakening from sleep, he had heard many feet passing up the climbing road—the feet of men and women and children, of camels and asses, and all had seemed to be of a procession ascending the mountainside. Lying flat upon the earth, he had parted the bushes cautiously, and watched, and listened to the shouts, cries, laughter, and talk of those who were near enough to be heard. So bit by bit he had heard the story of the passing throng. The great Emperor Augustus, who, to the common herd seemed some strange omnipotent in his remote and sumptuous paradise of Rome, had issued a decree that all the world of his subjects should be enrolled, and every man, woman, and child must enroll himself in his own city. And to the little town of Bethlehem all these travelers were wending their way, to the place of their nativity, in obedience to the great Caesar's command.

All through the day he watched them—men and women and children who belonged to one another, who rode together on their beasts, or walked

together hand in hand. Women on camels or asses held their little ones in their arms, or walked with the youngest slung on their backs. He heard boys laugh and talk with their fathers—boys of his own age, who trudged merrily along, and now and again ran forward, shouting with glee. He saw more than one strong man swing his child up to his shoulder and bear him along as if he found joy in his burden. Boy and girl companions played as they went and made holiday of their journey; young men or women who were friends, lovers, or brothers and sisters bore one another company.

"No one is alone," said Zia, twisting his thin fingers together—"no one! no one! And there are no lepers. The great Caesar would not count a leper. Perhaps, if he saw one, he would command him to be put to death."

And then he writhed upon the grass and sobbed again, his bent chest almost bursting with his efforts to make no sound. He had always been alone—always, always; but this loneliness was such as no young human thing could bear. He was no longer alive; he was no longer a human being. Unclean! Unclean! Unclean!

At last he slept, exhausted, and past his piteous, prostrate childhood and helplessness the slow procession wound its way up the mountain road toward the crescent of Bethlehem, knowing nothing of his nearness to its unburdened comfort and simple peace.

When he awakened, the night had fallen, and he opened his eyes upon a high vault of blue velvet darkness strewn with great stars. He saw this at the first moment of his consciousness; then he realized that there was no longer to be heard the sound either of passing hoofs or treading feet. The travelers who had gone by during the day had probably reached their journey's end, and gone to rest in their tents, or had found refuge in the inclosing khan that gave shelter to wayfarers and their beasts of burden.

But though there was no human creature near, and no sound of human voice or human tread, a strange change had taken place in him. His loneliness had passed away, and left him lying still and calm as though it had never existed, as though the crushed and broken child who had plunged from a precipice of woe into deadly, exhausted sleep was only a vague memory of a creature in a dark past dream.

Had it been himself? Lying upon his back, seeing only the immensity of the deep blue above him and the greatness of the stars, he scarcely dared to draw breath lest he should arouse himself to new anguish. It had not been he who had so suffered; surely it had been another Zia. What had come upon him, what had come upon the world? All was so still that it was as if the earth waited—as if it waited to hear some word that would be spoken out of the great space in which it hung. He was not hungry or cold or tired. It was as if he had never staggered and stumbled up the mountain path and dropped shuddering, to hide behind the bushes before the daylight came and men could see his white face. Surely he had rested long. He had never felt like this before, and he had never seen so wonderful a night. The stars had never been so many and so large. What made them so soft and brilliant that each one was almost like a sun? And he strangely felt that each looked down at him as if it said the word, though he did not know what the word was. Why had he been so terror-stricken? Why had he been so wretched? There were no lepers; there were no hunchbacks. There was only Zia, and he was at peace, and akin to the stars that looked down.

How heavenly still the waiting world was, how heavenly still! He lay and smiled and smiled; perhaps he lay so for an hour. Then high, high above he saw, or thought he saw, in the remoteness of the vault of blue a brilliant whiteness float. Was it a strange snowy cloud or was he dreaming? It seemed to grow whiter, more brilliant. His breath came fast, and his heart beat trembling in his breast, because he had never seen clouds so strangely, purely brilliant. There was another, higher, farther distant, and yet more dazzling still. Another and another showed its radiance until at last an arch of splendor seemed to stream across the sky.

"It is like the glory of the ark of the covenant," he gasped, and threw his arm across his blinded eyes, shuddering with rapture.

He could not uncover his face, and it was as he lay quaking with an unearthly joy that he first thought he heard sounds of music as remotely distant as the lights.

"Is it on earth?" he panted. "Is it on earth?"

He struggled to his knees. He had heard of miracles and wonders of old, and of the past ages when the sons of God visited the earth.

"Glory to God in the highest!" he stammered again and again and again. "Glory to the great Jehovah!" and he touched his forehead seven times to the earth.

Then he beheld a singular thing. When he had gone to sleep a flock of sheep had been lying near him on the grass. The flock was still there, but something seemed to be happening to it. The creatures were awakening from their sleep as if they had heard something. First one head was raised, and then another and another and another, until every head was lifted, and every one was turned toward a certain point as if listening. What were they listening for? Zia could see nothing, though he turned his own face toward the climbing road and listened with them. The floating radiance was so increasing in the sky that at this point of the mountain-side it seemed no longer to the night, and the far-away paeans held him breathless with mysterious awe. Was the sound on earth? Where did it come from? Where?

"Praised be Jehovah!" he heard his weak and shaking young voice quaver.

Some belated travelers were coming slowly up the road. He heard an ass's feet and low voices.

The sheep heard them also. Had they been waiting for them? They rose one by one—the whole flock—to their feet, and turned in a body toward the approaching sounds.

Zia stood up with them. He waited also, and it was as if at this moment his soul so lifted itself that it almost broke away from his body— almost.

Around the curve an ass came slowly bearing a woman, and led by a man who walked by his side. He was a man of sober years and walked wearily. Zia's eyes grew wide with awe and wondering as he gazed, scarce breathing.

The light upon the hillside was so softly radiant and so clear that he could

[Illustration with caption: "Zia's eyes grew wide with awe and wondering as he gazed, scarce breathing"—Page 38]

see that the woman's robe was blue and that she lifted her face to the stars as she rode. It was a young face, and pale with the pallor of lilies, and her eyes were as stars of the morning. But this was not all. A radiance shone from her pure pallor, and bordering her blue robe and veil was a faint, steady glow of light. And as she passed the standing and waiting sheep, they slowly bowed themselves upon their knees before her, and so knelt until she had passed by and was out of sight. Then they returned to their places, and slept as before.

When she was gone, Zia found that he also was kneeling. He did not know when his knees had bent. He was faint with ecstasy.

"She goes to Bethlehem," he heard himself say as he had heard himself speak before. "I, too; I, too."

He stood a moment listening to the sound of the ass's retreating feet as it grew fainter in the distance. His breath came quick and soft. The light had died away from the hillside, but the high-floating radiance seemed to pass to and fro in the heavens, and now and again he thought he heard the faint, far sound that was like music so distant that it was as a thing heard in a dream.

"Perhaps I behold visions," he murmured. "It may be that I shall awake."

But he found himself making his way through the bushes and setting his feet upon the road. He must follow, he must follow. Howsoever steep the hill, he must climb to Bethlehem. But as he went on his way it did not seem steep, and he did not waver or toil as he usually did when walking. He felt no weariness or ache in his limbs, and the high radiance gently lighted the path and dimly revealed that many white flowers he had never seen before seemed to have sprung up by the roadside and to wave softly to and fro, giving forth a fragrance so remote and faint, yet so clear, that it did not seem of earth. It was perhaps part of the vision.

Of the distance he climbed his thought took no cognizance. There was in this vision neither distance nor time. There was only faint radiance, far, strange sounds, and the breathing of air which made him feel an ecstasy of lightness as he moved. The other Zia had traveled painfully, had stumbled and struck his feet against wayside stones. He seemed ten thousand miles, ten thousand years away. It was not he who went to Bethlehem, led as if by some power invisible. To Bethlehem! To Bethlehem, where went the woman whose blue robe was bordered with a glow of fair luminousness and whose face, like an uplifted lily, softly shone. It was she he followed, knowing no reason but that his soul was called.

When he reached the little town and stood at last near the gateway of the khan in which the day-long procession of wayfarers had crowded to take refuge for the night, he knew that he would find no place among the multitude within its walls. Too many of the great Caesar's subjects had been born in Bethlehem and had come back for their enrolment. The khan was crowded to its utmost, and outside lingered many who had not been able to gain admission and who consulted plaintively with one another as to where they might find a place to sleep, and to eat the food they carried with them.

Zia had made his way to the entrance-gate only because he knew the travelers he had followed would seek shelter there, and that he might chance to hear of them.

He stood a little apart from the gate and waited. Something would tell him what he must do. Almost as this thought entered his mind he heard voices speaking near him. Two women were talking together, and soon he began to hear their words.

"Joseph of Nazareth and Mary his wife," one said. "Both of the line of David. There was no room for them, even as there was no room for others not of royal lineage. To the mangers in the cave they have gone, seeing the woman had sore need of rest. She, thou knowest—"

Zia heard no more. He did not ask where the cave lay. He had not needed to ask his way to Bethlehem. That which had led him again directed his

feet away from the entrance-gate of the khan, past the crowded court and the long, low wall of stone within the inclosure of which the camels and asses browsed and slept, on at last to a pathway leading to the gray of rising rocks. Beneath them was the cave, he knew, though none had told him so. Only a short distance, and he saw what drew him trembling nearer. At the open entrance, through which he could see the rough mangers of stone, the heaps of fodder, and the ass munching slowly in a corner, the woman who wore the blue robe stood leaning wearily against the heavy wooden post. And the soft light bordering her garments set her in a frame of faint radiance and glowed in a halo about her head.

"The light! the light!" cried Zia in a breathless whisper. And he crossed his hands upon his breast.

Her husband surely could not see it. He moved soberly about, unpacking the burden the ass had carried and seeming to see naught else. He heaped straw in a corner with care, and threw his mantle upon it.

"Come," he said. "Here thou canst rest, and I can watch by thy side. The angels of the Lord be with thee!" The woman turned from the door and went toward him, walking with slow steps. He gazed at her with mild, unillumined eyes.

"Does he not see the light!" panted Zia. "Does he not see the light!"

Soon he himself no longer saw it. Joseph of Nazareth came to the wooden doors and drew them together, and the boy stood alone on the mountain-side, trembling still, and wet with the dew of the night; but not weary, not hungered, not athirst or afraid, only quaking with wonder and joy— he, the little hunchback Zia, who had known no joy before since the hour of his birth.

He sank upon the earth slowly in an exquisite peace—a peace that thrilled his whole being as it stole over his limbs, deepening moment by moment. His head drooped softly upon a cushion of moss. As his eyelids fell, he saw the splendor of whiteness floating in the height of the purple vault above him.

The dawn was breaking and yet the stars had not faded away. This was his thought when his eyes first opened on a great one, greater than any other in the sky, and of so pure a brilliance that it seemed as if even the sun would not be bright enough to put it out. It hung high in the paling blue, high as the white radiance; and as he lay and gazed, he thought it surely moved. What new star was it that in that one night had been born? He had watched the stars through so many desolate hours that he knew each great one as a friend, and this one he had never seen before.

The morning was cold, and his clothes were wet with dew, but he felt no chill. He remembered; yes, he remembered. If he had lived in a vision the day before, he was surely living in one yet. The Zia who had been starved and beaten and driven out naked into the world, who had clutched his thin breast and sobbed, writhing upon the earth, where was he? He looked down upon his hands and saw the cracked and scaling palms, and it was as though they were not. He thrust back the covering from his chest and saw the spots there. But there were no lepers, there were no hunchbacks; there were only Zia and the light. He knelt and turned himself toward the cave and prayed, and as he so knelt and prayed the man Joseph rolled open the heavy wooden door.

Then Zia, still kneeling, beat himself softly upon the breast and prayed again, not as before to Jehovah, but to that which he beheld.

The light was there, fair, radiant, wonderful. The cave was bathed in it. The woman in the blue robe sat upon the straw, and in her arms she held a new-born child. Zia touched his forehead to the earth again, again, again, unknowing that he did so. The child was the light itself!

He must rise and draw near. That which had drawn him up the mountainside drew him again. The child was the light itself! As he crept near the cave's entrance, the woman's eyes rested upon him soft and wonderful.

She spoke to him—she spoke!

"Be not afraid," she said. "Draw nigh and behold!"

Her voice was not as the voice of other women; it was like her eyes, his body, through his blood, through every limb and fleshy atom of him, he felt it steal—new life, warming, thrilling, wakening in his veins new life! As he felt it, he knelt quaking with rapture even as he had stood the night before gazing at the light. The new-born hand lay still.

He did not know how long he knelt. He did not know that the woman leaned toward him, scarce drawing breath, her wondrous eyes resting upon him as if she waited for a sign. Even as she so gazed she beheld it, and spoke, whispering as in awed prayer:

"Go forth and cleanse thy flesh in running water," she said. "Go forth."

He moved, he rose, he stood upright—the hunchback Zia who had never stood upright before! His body was straight, his limbs were strong. He looked upon his hands, and there was no blemish or spot to be seen!

"I am made whole!" he cried in ecstasy so wild that his boy's voice rang and echoed in the cave's hollowed roof. "I am made whole!"

"Go forth," she said softly. "Go forth and give praise."

He turned and went into the dawning day. He stood swaying, and heard himself sob forth a rapturous cry of prayer. His flesh was fresh and pure; he stood erect and tall. He was as others whom God had not cursed. The light! the light! He stretched forth his arms to the morning sky.

Some shepherds roughly clothed in the skins of lambs and kids were climbing the hill toward the cave. They carried their crooks, and they talked eagerly as though in wonderment at some strange thing which had befallen them, looking up at the heavens, and one pointed with his crook.

"Surely it draws nearer, the star!" he said. "Look!"

As they passed a thicket where a brook flowed through the trees a fair boy came forth, cleansed, fresh, and radiant as if he had but just bathed in its clear waters. It was the boy Zia.

"Who is this one?" said the oldest shepherd.

"How beautiful he is! How the light shines on him! He looks like a king's son."

[Illustration with caption: "'How beautiful he is!'"—Page 54]

And as they passed, they made obeisance to him.

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